

**Thin Places: 1. Be Still and Know**  
**Psalm 46:10**  
**February 6, 2022**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

When did you first become aware of God? Not when did you first hear about God or learn about God or even speak to God, but aware of God's presence. I grew up in a Christian home where religious practices were part of what it meant to be family. Yes, my Dad was the pastor, and we were in church every Sunday. I heard the scripture, sang the songs, and listened in on the prayers. I went to Sunday School every week and had a great time every summer at Vacation Bible School. At home, before every meal, my Dad would say a prayer, and at night, my mom would come into my room and we would pray: God, thank you for today. Watch over mom and dad and my sisters. And I would pray for anyone else who came to mind. But in all of this, as important as it was, I never had a sense that God was really present right there with me. Not until I was 19 years old, and late one night in the midst of what was a stressful and anxious time of my life, I cried out. It wasn't even a prayer like I'd been taught to pray. What came forth was not from my head but from my heart: "Help me, God. I don't want to be here. I don't want to feel this way. If you are really out there somewhere, help me." It was the cry of my heart. And in the moments that followed, I heard my name. To my shock and surprise, I was suddenly AWARE of God.

When did you first become aware of God? It's not necessary to hear your name, but we want something, don't we? We want to know. Our lives get crammed and compressed so that our heart starts to feel claustrophobic. It's when we are too busy for too long with too little time. We want something. We want to know that we are not alone, that there is someone or something greater than ourselves and whatever we are facing in life, to know that we matter and we matter to God.

Many Americans no longer identify with religion, and yet the interest in spirituality is as great as it ever was. One in three adults have turned away from the church altogether. That number is even higher among persons under 40. But surveys indicate that almost all Americans pray. 85% say they pray weekly and 47% listen for God's response. And the number of people who are practicing forms of prayer and meditation such as yoga are increasing. We want a connection with God – not a knowing that comes not from the intellect, but a knowing of the heart, a spiritual connection. To be able to speak with the Creator of the Universe and to know that I have his attention and that God has my attention. To be fully and completely aware of God. we want that.

There is an old Celtic concept called thin places. It comes from a time in the 5<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity came to Ireland. It says that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller. A thin place is where the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted and one is able to receive a glimpse of the glory of God. That thin place could be a geographical location where you pause and look at the world before you – from a hillside, a mountaintop, the seashore, the middle of lake, looking right outside your bedroom window, or when the light comes through the colors of a stained glass window. It is that sacred moment when we feel a sudden connection with God. It is an experience of the holy, a prayer that is answered as though God is tapping you on the shoulder to say: "Yes, it's me. Pay attention. I'm right here."

In the Old Testament, that place was found inside the Holy Place of the tabernacle. The place beyond the curtain or veil was called the Holy of Holies. It was God's special dwelling place. The

veil shielded a holy God from a sinful people. Whoever entered the Holy of Holies was entering the very presence of God. It was said that anyone except the high priest who entered the Holy of Holies would die – because the light of God’s glory would be too much. Even the high priest, God’s chosen mediator could only pass through the veil once a year on the Day of Atonement. It’s not that people didn’t experience the presence of God outside the tabernacle, but the high priest was the mediator. The veil was seen as a barrier so a person would not inadvertently stumble into God’s presence. God was shielded from us, sinners that we are. However, Jesus’ death on the cross changed that. When he died, the curtain, the veil in the Jerusalem temple was torn in half from top to bottom. Only God could have done this, because it was too high and the veil too thick for human hands to have torn it. Suddenly God’s presence was now accessible to all. Now we can boldly enter into God’s presence.

But it’s not that easy. Do you remember Mother Teresa? In 1946, she had her “thin place” experience where she felt God calling her to devote her life to the poor. She would spend the rest of her life serving the destitute and starving in Calcutta, India and also founding the Missionaries of Charity that spread to 133 countries before her death in 1997. Ten years later, a book was published, *Come Be My Light*, a compilation of Mother Teresa’s private writings, describing her experiences of profound spiritual darkness that haunted her for 50 years. She admitted she did not practice what she preached and sadly admits a contrast between her exterior demeanor and her interior desolation. She wrote: *“The smile is a big cloak which covers a multitude of pains...my cheerfulness is a cloak by which I cover the emptiness and misery...I deceive people with this weapon.”* She described the absence of God’s presence as an emptiness, loneliness, spiritual dryness.

And if that’s Mother Teresa, then what about us? It may not be a 50 year experience that we try to hide from others. But we know this dark place where we can’t seem to open the veil that seems to separate us from God. One reason we have trouble falling asleep. I remember this old Dennis the Menace cartoon where late at night, Dennis stands at the side of his parent’s bed with a blanket in hand and says: “I wouldn’t be so scared of the dark, if I could just keep my mind off my thoughts.” And there are nights like that. We finally decide we’ve had enough for the day. We shut everything off and climb into bed, and either we are uncomfortable with the silence or everything that’s happening in our lives comes pouring out at once – and it’s too much. So, I get up and turn on the television or get on the computer or take out a book. It’s like trying to cover my ears so I don’t have to hear what’s inside.

That’s why I find Psalm 46 to be reassuring. The writer points us to that place, that thin place where God can do God’s greatest work in us. **God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.** This is the kind of chaos that we fear, that everything around us would fall apart. God is our refuge and strength. **There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.** There is a river, and it is the source of life. The writer says that life flows from the Holy Place – behind the veil. **God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.** It’s where God is, the God who is our strength and refuge. And the writer proceeds to list ways that God has been our strength and refuge. “Come and see what the Lord has done.” And then, finally in verse 10, God speaks: **“Be still, and know that I am God”** God waits in the stillness. God waits to meet with me. God can’t heal and can’t comfort and direct until I am still enough to let go. “Be still, and know that I am God” It’s not an invitation to ignore what’s going on in our lives. It’s not an invitation to somehow withdraw from the world – as if we could really do that anyway. Rather, stand still and recognize that God is.

Last spring as I have done for many years, I set aside an entire week to begin working on a preaching plan for the upcoming year, and for the first three days, I tried. I read the Bible. I prayed, “God give me some direction.” I walked for hours. I sat with a pen and a notepad, hoping something would come to mind worth writing down – but there was nothing. It’s not like I wasn’t thinking about anything. My mind was swirling with enough thoughts and concerns for myself and others that there was no way that I was allowing God to break through. For three days. And I began to fear that my week would end, and I would have nothing. But on the morning of the fourth day, I got up before sunrise and I went out on the deck where I was staying – a deck that overlooked Lake Superior – and I saw this [sunrise]. I’ve seen a lot of sunrises, so I don’t even think it was the beauty of that morning’s sunrise, but as the sunlight came over the horizon. I felt something – something that I don’t think I could have felt if it hadn’t been for the prior three days of silence. Suddenly, this was my thin place. And Psalm 46:10 came to mind: “Be still and know...” And I went back inside, and for the next few hours my writing hand could hardly keep up with my thoughts. It was as if I wasn’t even in control.

Last week, I came across an article that was titled, “How 20 Seconds of silence can change your life.” He could have been describing my life and how rare it is to be still – completely still. Still enough that God could break through. So he said we need practice, and he suggested starting with 20 seconds. When you wake up in the morning, before checking your email or even getting out of bed, be still for 20 seconds. When you pour that first cup of coffee, be still for 20 seconds before you drink it. When you get in the car, turn off the radio and be still for 20 seconds before driving. At the end of a conversation, instead of rushing into something else, take 20 seconds to be still. It’s learning how to be still. It’s practicing, because it is in the stillness that we find the “Thin Places”.

You recognize this, don’t you? It’s a waiting room. No one wants to be in the waiting room, because what do you do in the waiting room but wait? And for how long? Who knows? That’s why it’s called the waiting room. Many years ago, in the first church that I was serving, a young couple had a baby with a heart that did not work as it should and when she was just over a year old she was taken to the University of Minnesota for open heart surgery. I asked her parents if they would like me to come and wait with them during surgery. They had several offers and declined them all. The surgery would be eight hours, and they really didn’t want to feel obliged to talk to anyone while they waited. Well, I showed up anyway. I remember entering the waiting room, which wasn’t very large but filled with people who were waiting for news of someone who was in surgery. When I opened the door, everyone looked up hoping I might be the one who would bring the news that they were hoping for. The couple I had come to see were sitting on the floor because no chairs were available. And I sat down next to them, and before they could say anything I said, “It’s okay. Don’t say anything. I’m here so you will know that Jesus meant it when he said, “I will be with you always.” And periodically, as we waited, I would repeat those words. At one point another person in the room, asked, “Would you say that again?” Jesus meant it when he said, “I will be with you always.” Somehow those words changed that waiting room to a thin place. Be still. And know. God is.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 6, 2022**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord God, send your Spirit into this space. Open my heart to your presence. Touch and heal any brokenness. Lift any despair and doubt. Comfort and nourish me with the blessings of your love. O God, at this time and place, I am here to meet with you and to grow in the warmth and compassion of your love and grace. Amen.

## Monday, February 7

### Scripture: Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,  
though its waters roar and foam  
and the mountains quake with their surging.  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy place where the Most High dwells.  
God is within her, she will not fall;  
God will help her at break of day.  
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.  
The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.  
Come and see what the LORD has done,  
the desolations he has brought on the earth.  
He makes wars cease  
to the ends of the earth.  
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.  
He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth."  
The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

**Observation:** The writer of this psalm affirms trust in God in all circumstances. There are three parts to the psalm: verses 1-3 to remind us of the chaos that existed at the beginning of time; verses 4-7 to remind us that a river of life flows from God; and verses 8-11 to remind us to behold God and what God can do.

**Application:** This psalm reminds us of where we are. We are in the desert, and at the same time we are in the Promised Land. God can seem absent, and yet God is present. "Be still and know..." When were you first aware of God's presence? Where do you find the solitude to "be still and know" God?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you are the creator of the universe, the author of all life, and yet you would reach out to me. Help me to know that you are as close to me as my next breath. I want to feel your presence. Be close as I listen. Amen.

## Tuesday, February 8

### Scripture: John 20:1-18

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first

to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying. Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means *Teacher*). Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

**Observation:** In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, several women come to the tomb for the purpose of completing preparation of Jesus' body for burial. In John's account, only one woman, Mary Magdalene, is mentioned. This is her experience of the Risen Lord. Unlike the other writers, why might John focus on Mary? Unlike the disciples who fell away, she was brave enough to stand by Jesus in his final hours of suffering on the cross.

**Application:** It is not in seeing that she recognizes Jesus, but hearing her name. This is very personal. Have you ever sensed God calling your name, or speaking (literally or figuratively) to you? How did you feel knowing that God would reach out to you?

**Prayer:** Open my heart, O God, to your presence. Help me to see and to hear the signs of what you are doing all around me. Like Mary, may I recognize your voice and find the direction that I need. May others see in me the presence of your Spirit. Amen.

### **Wednesday, February 9**

#### **Scripture: Genesis 32:22-30**

Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking." But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me." He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won." Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name." But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved."

**Observation:** This is Jacob's second encounter with God (Gen 28:10-22). The God who promised to bring Jacob back to the land of Canaan when he left finally encounters Jacob in a deathly struggle on his return, changing his name and leaving him disabled before blessing him.

Jacob is all alone that night, facing what will be the toughest day of his life. That's when he experiences God.

**Application:** The 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, St. John of the Cross, penned the phrase, "dark night of the soul," to describe the journey of our soul from its bodily home to its union with God. Maybe you have experienced that dark night when you wrestled with the circumstances of your life and what you were facing. In such a moment, what could possibly lead you to God or make you open and available to God's presence? Have you ever been so tired or so overcome with your present circumstance that you let God in?

**Prayer:** Lord, you gave me life. You know all that I am facing. Be the healing presence, the source of hope and comfort, the direction that I so often lack. Hear the cries of my heart. Be at work deep within all those whom I lift to you. May they know of your mercy and love. Amen.

### Thursday, February 10

#### **Scripture: 1 Samuel 7:11-13**

The Israelite soldiers came out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines. They struck them down until they reached a place just below Beth-car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah. He named it Ebenezer, explaining, "The LORD helped us to this very point." So the Philistines were defeated, and they stopped coming into Israelite territory. The LORD's hand was against the Philistines throughout Samuel's life.

**Observation:** Under constant attack from the Philistines, the people of Israel had given up on God and turned to other gods for help. Samuel brought them back together with a singular focus on God. This time when the Philistines attacked, Israel prevailed, and Samuel placed an Ebenezer (stone of help) to remember.

**Application:** What makes a place sacred or holy? Can a battlefield be a holy place? Samuel believed it was, enough so that he wanted that place to be remembered as a place where God came and helped in a spectacular way. Is there a special place (a "thin place") where you have experienced God? How does returning to that place or remembering that place bring you closer to God?

**Prayer:** Help me to remember, dear Lord, that you have been with me, even at those times when you seemed distant and unavailable. Let those times when I have felt your presence be a source of encouragement and help, so that I may encourage others. Amen.

### Friday, February 11

#### **Scripture: Romans 1:20**

Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—God's eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse.

**Observation:** Paul reminds us that all of creation is a tangible, material witness to the invisible reality of God. In what is visible, we can see the invisible! By looking closely at creation, we can gain great insight into the Creator – God's character, purposes, ethic – his "invisible qualities."

**Application:** How often have we been outdoors and looked up at a sunset or observed the landscape before us and felt some sense of awe and wonder? And in that moment, you felt

God's presence. It might even happen as you sit at a window and gaze at the scene at hand or the sky. Take time in your day to observe the visible in order to witness the invisible reality of God.

**Prayer:** God of grace and glory, help me to know that you are with me throughout this day. Help me to take moments in this day to pause and see the works of your hand. May such moments guide me in your ways. Amen.

**Saturday, February 12**

**Scripture: Psalm 8:3-4; Psalm 139:13-14**

When I look up at your skies,  
at what your fingers made—  
the moon and the stars  
that you set firmly in place—  
what are human beings  
that you think about them;  
what are human beings  
that you pay attention to them?

You are the one who created my innermost parts;  
you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb.  
I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart.  
Your works are wonderful—I know that very well.

**Observation:** Thin places are all around us. (A "thin place" is a place where the line between the spiritual and the physical is paper thin, where the spiritual and physical touch each other in a tangible way.) The psalmist communicates the wonder of being known and loved by the Creator.

**Application:** Whether it is realizing the vastness and majesty of the universe that God has made or the delicate and precious nature of life itself, God is all around us. We see God in nature, in people, in acts of justice and mercy and love. Others may even see God in us.

**Prayer:** *(Take a few moments to consider what God has made and how you see God around you. Give thanks.)* Help me, God, not to take for granted what you have done and continue to do. Thank you for all that you have done. May I find strength and confidence to live and serve through your abiding presence all around me. Amen.